



Employee Spotlight: Melissa Montoya

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Helping students reach for the future

Melissa Montoya of the Policy Office (ADMASER-IS) is devoted to raising a bright 11-year-old son whose passions include both basketball and math, but her dedication to young people goes beyond family. When she is not at her job, she is at her son's school, Tony E. Quintana Elementary, in Sombrillo (part of the Española School District). The students there have come to think of her as part of the staff. "I've known some of them so long that they're like my own kids," she says.

Melissa's time at the school is part of her mission to show Northern New Mexico students the future they could have and help them reach for it. In the elementary school, her mission starts with little things—making copies, bringing cupcakes—and expands to include the more-serious work of inspiring students with her own talks and enriching the curriculum with outside sources.

One group she brought to the school is Cornerstones Community Partnerships, which restores historical Northern New Mexico structures. Melissa explains, "I thought, how do you help elementary school students with hands-on math and science?" A Cornerstones session in the science of making adobe bricks fit the bill. It was a cold day, she says, so instead of working outside, "we took over a classroom. We put tarps down, but the classroom still ended up covered in mud. I stayed until after 5:00 to clean it up."

Engaging students in so many ways

by Jim Stein.

Photo

Elementary students are not the only ones important to Melissa. Earlier in her career, while in the Community Programs Office—now the Community Partnerships Office (CPO)—she got involved with the Lab's initiatives for education in the STEM subjects: science, technology, engineering, and math. She helped organize the RoboRAVE Rally Northern New Mexico, which the Laboratory helps support. In the rally, teams of students from third grade up build and program robots to perform tasks. This year Melissa coached an Española RoboRAVE team and plans to continue in that role. "The rally engages kids in so many ways, not just in creating the robot but in learning to work in a team. And it's wonderful to see the kids' happiness when they get the job done."

Although no longer with CPO, Melissa continues to support the Laboratory's student outreach. She visits area high schools, giving talks about Laboratory student programs,

apparently to great effect. At a Lab student picnic, a young woman suddenly came up and hugged her. The young woman said she had heard one of Melissa's high school talks, and that was why she was now a Lab student intern.

Melissa began reaching out to students when she was still a student herself, working on her PhD at Northern Arizona University. While pursuing her own studies, she coordinated the Hispanic Mother-Daughter program, which mentors Hispanic middle and high school girls, improving their self-image, preparing them for college, and teaching them about opportunities for financial aid. She is now developing a similar program for Española Middle School, this time to include boys.

Showing kids the path

Melissa knows the importance of financial aid, as she had some herself during her academic career. She earned her BA and MA at New Mexico Highlands University after graduating from Española Valley High School and before heading to Arizona to start her PhD, which she is still completing. She wants to give back and so now is on the boards of the Northern New Mexico College Foundation and MANA del Norte.

Both organizations support scholarships for Northern New Mexico students, so they fit neatly with Melissa's desire to make area students courageous about their own futures. "They think they can't go to college," she says. "I want to show kids the path and give them the tools they need so they won't be afraid."

Resources

- [RoboRAVE](#) Northern New Mexico is a steppingstone to RoboRAVE International, which began in New Mexico and quickly grew to include other countries.
- [Cornerstones Community Partnerships](#) restores architectural treasures in New Mexico, using only traditional building methods.
- See what's going on at [Tony E. Quintana Elementary School](#).
- [MANA del Norte](#) is dedicated to empowering Latinas in the Northern New Mexico counties of Los Alamos, Mora, Rio Arriba, Santa Fe, San Miguel, and Taos through education, community service, leadership development, and advocacy.
- The Northern New Mexico College Foundation promotes the programs and students of [Northern New Mexico College, in Española](#).

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Los Alamos National Laboratory

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(505) 667-7000

Los Alamos, NM

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